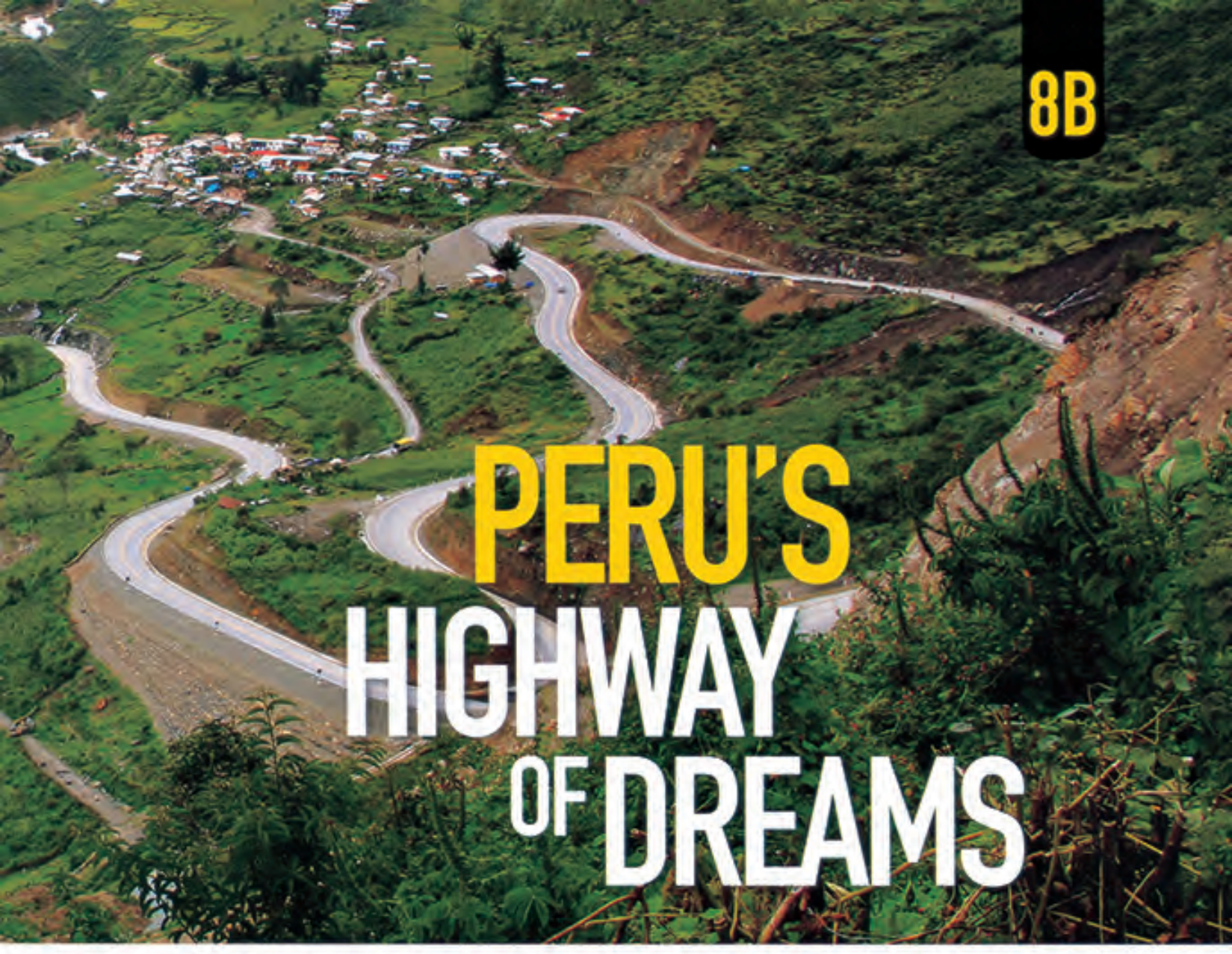

8B

PERU'S HIGHWAY OF DREAMS

A new road that connects the Pacific with the Atlantic could bring riches—and environmental ruin.

Mary Luz Guerra remembers a trip she took in 2003 from the city of Cusco, high in the Peruvian Andes, to her home in Puerto Maldonado, a city in the Amazon rain forest. By plane, this 320-kilometer (200-mile) journey would have taken only 37 minutes, but Mary Luz had traveled by truck: along narrow mountain roads, across rushing rivers, and through **dense** Amazon jungle. It took her three days to reach home. During the long and exhausting trip, she remembers thinking, "I can't wait till they build that highway!" Almost ten years after that impossibly long journey, Mary Luz's wish came true.

Bridging a Continent

In early 2012, the Transoceanic Highway opened to public vehicles for the first time. A dream of Peru's leaders since the 1950s, work on the vast network of roads and bridges began in 2006 and was completed in late 2011. Today, the east–west passageway spans 2,600 kilometers (1,600 miles). From Peru's Pacific Ocean coastline, it continues across the Andes Mountains and through a large part of the Amazon rain forest in the Peruvian state of Madre de Dios. It then travels into Brazil, where it connects with a network of existing highways to the Atlantic.

The Transoceanic Highway has been celebrated as one of South America's greatest engineering feats, and supporters say it will greatly improve people's lives. Until recently, travel between the cities of Cusco and Puerto Maldonado in Peru took days by bus or truck—as Mary Luz's story **illustrates**—and drivers had to use narrow, **partially** unpaved[1] mountain roads. Now, thanks to the new highway, the trip only takes a few hours, and is much safer.

Improving People's Lives

In addition to making travel faster and easier, supporters say the highway will also be good for business. There is **enormous** demand in North America and Asia for Brazilian and Peruvian products, including soybeans, beef, and gold. A number of companies in Cusco and Puerto Maldonado also sell wood to different corners of the world. Many of these companies transport their lumber[2] to the Pacific, where it travels by ship to other countries. Thanks to the highway, wood can now reach the Pacific in days; in the

1 If a road is **unpaved**, it is mostly dirt.

2 **Lumber** is wood that has been cut into boards.

Sunset over the Amazon rain forest, Madre de Dios, Peru

past, it could take a week or more. This lowers costs and allows the wood to reach a company's **customers** sooner, and also in better condition. In the long run, say many business owners, this will mean more profit.

The highway will also open up areas of the Peruvian Amazon that were **inaccessible** just a few years ago. The highway may increase activity in these areas and give people new places to live and travel to. This, in turn, could mean more jobs and money for Peruvians.

Environmental Challenges

Despite the highway's many potential benefits, environmentalists are concerned. The Transoceanic passes directly through a large part of the Amazon rain forest, in the state of Madre de Dios in Peru. According to a Peruvian government study, the forested area in the western mountains of this state has the greatest biodiversity[3] of any place on Earth, and until recently, large parts of the forest were in pristine[4] condition. As more people are moving into the region, environmentalists are worrying about the **impact** this will have on the Amazon's plants and animals, many of which are found nowhere else.

Shortly after the highway opened, large numbers of people began coming into Puerto Maldonado from all over Peru—and the world—to mine gold. There's a lot of money to be made in mining, as well as in farming, says environmental photographer Gabby Salazar. "I think we're going to see a big increase in farming," she says. "Right across the border in Brazil, you see soybean farms all over the place." Studies show three-quarters of the deforestation[5] of the Brazilian Amazon **occurs** within 50 kilometers (30 miles) of a highway, and environmentalists like Salazar are concerned that the same thing will happen in Peru. "It's having an impact on the environment," she explains. "It's having an impact on the people as well."

Faced with these risks, many Peruvians talk about the importance of being **practical**. "In rural[6] Peru, a lot of people are living in poverty, so it's very difficult to say don't build the highway," explains Roger Mustalish, president of the Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research. "But every time you see a road like this going through, you soon see major changes." Will these changes be mostly positive or negative? Many Peruvians are hopeful, but only time will tell.

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3 **Biodiversity** is the existence of a wide variety of living things (plants, animals, insects, etc.) in a certain place.

4 If something is **pristine**, it is in its original condition or is unspoiled.

5 **Deforestation** is the destruction or cutting down of all the trees in an area.

6 **Rural** places are in the country, far away from cities.